

Classic Posters - The Poster Style of Gary Grimshaw

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by Michael Erlewine

Gary Grimshaw is probably the first non-West Coast artist to join the ranks of the major psychedelic artists like Wes Wilson and Rick Griffin. Although Grimshaw now lives in the Bay Area and has, over the years, spent considerable time there, he is first and foremost a Michigan artist. For the most part, Grimshaw's finest work was done for venues in the Midwest, in Michigan and sometimes Ohio.

And here is a working artist, in the finest sense of the word. Coming from a family of draftsman, illustrators, and printers, Grimshaw was immersed in colors and form from an early age. And while his poster work can be divided into several distinct periods, we should not forget that Grimshaw also produced an almost endless variety of flyers, advertisement, handbills, and what-have-you for the alternative community. I am not aware of any artist in psychedelic era that has produced more work than Gary Grimshaw. Randy Tuten is the only one in contention.

While some of the San Francisco artists were lucky enough to fall into the pretty lucrative market for psychedelia on the West Coast, such was not the case in the Midwest. Payment for poster art in the Detroit area was very low, \$75 being the most Grimshaw made at the peak of his Grande Ballroom work. And, in Detroit -- the motor city -- posters were not that effective and soon gave way to radio ads, relegating much of the printed work to handbills and cards. At the end of the Grande run there were very few posters, mostly just cards.

An artist, like Grimshaw, had to turn elsewhere to make a living with his art. Hard for Grimshaw, but lucky for poster lovers, he broadcast his skills through dozens of venues, with hundreds of handbills and flyers, with art not just for music events, but for whatever was needed by the counterculture. In a true sense, his art served the community in which he lived.

Grimshaw's style is easy to recognize. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he does not fill up every last bit of paper with content, but leaves plenty of space around his design elements. Sometimes this is achieved by having no detail on the border of the poster -- leaving it blank. At other times, he will place a frame around the edge of the poster, fill the frame with color, and float his design elements within that color pool. Grimshaw does not often use elaborate decoration. Instead, his decorative elements tend to be simple and fluid, sometimes almost gestures. He, like poster artist Bob Fried, is a master of understatement, and his posters, in general, have a calming, rather than an inciting, effect on the mind. And his work wears well on the wall.

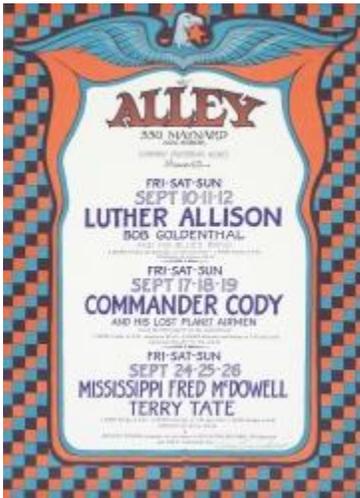
Grimshaw's treatment of type is also somewhat unusual. While many '60s artists morph the type to fill the space, Grimshaw tends to float his type in plenty of space, as he would any other design element. Where there is more than a little text (many bands on one gig), he sometimes makes a simple paragraph-like block of text and then reduces the size of the type, with the headliners larger and the opening acts progressively smaller, like a chart at the eye doctor. He treats this whole paragraph block as a design element. It works well.

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Detroit Rock and Roll Revival

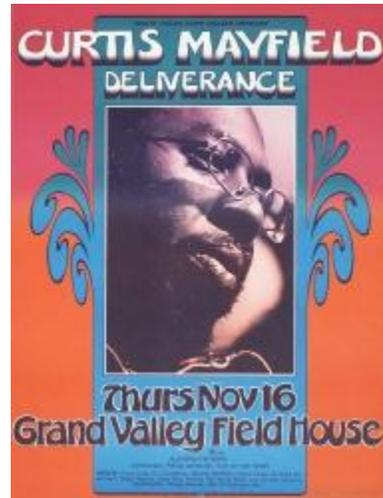
In fact, it would be fair to say that Grimshaw has taken the traditional marquee-style poster format (not much used in psychedelic posters) and raised it to another level. Examples of this would be the Detroit Rock and Roll Revival, the Mt. Clemens Pop Festival, and the posters he did for The Alley, among others. This effect is very satisfying.



Poster for 'The Alley'

Grimshaw's sense of color and space is profound, and he often devotes large areas of his posters to a single area of color. A good example of his sense of

color, his spacious use of that color, and his fluid, but simple, decorative motifs is the poster for Curtis Mayfield at Grand Valley Field House. Posters don't get much better than this. Sure, this poster served a purpose, but what you have here, first and foremost, is a fine piece of art or, as time will prove, a piece of fine art.



Curtis Mayfield

Gary Grimshaw did not produce many posters for the San Francisco venues. He served the Midwest, and it has taken some time for him to be granted equal status with the major West Coast artists. But he has that status now. Further, there are elements to his work that are only now beginning to be valued and recognized. Grimshaw's love for and dedication to the community and times in which he lived brings to his work a special quality that has its own unique signature, one that, in this critic's opinion, is only now beginning to be appreciated.

A few years ago, I managed to dig up from my basement an original copy of Grimshaw's first poster, nicknamed "The Seagull." There it had sat ever since the day in October of 1966, when it was first

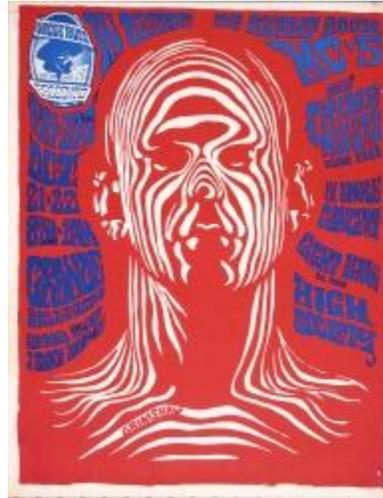
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used at the Grande Ballroom. I had all but forgotten about it for some 30 years. It has the same punch today as when I first viewed it. Originals are very tough to come across, but a reprint is available.



The Seagull -- Grimshaw's First Poster

Grimshaw's third poster for the Grande Ballroom, nicknamed the "Zebraman." Now, this poster is good sized, measuring something like 17.5x2.5, but it seems, in person, larger than that. It is very striking. The image came from a Time Magazine cover and was first used by Alton Kelley and Stanley Mouse for FD-28 of the Family Dog series, something like a month earlier. This is a sentimental favorite for me, because I played at that gig and my band, The Prime Movers Blues Band, is on the poster. Nostalgia aside, this is a powerful poster when seen on the wall.



The Zebraman

The 5th poster in the Grande Ballroom series, nicknamed the "Woman with Hair," this large (and rare) poster is more in the West Coast tradition, with a kind of Native American or Eskimo sensibility. The soft earth tones make this a very elegant wall piece. It has never been reprinted and is almost impossible to find.

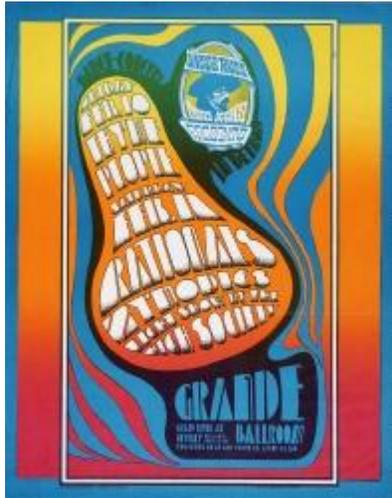


Woman with Hair

The 8th poster in the Grande Ballroom series, nicknamed the "Light Bulb," is a gig for the Ann Arbor Group, The Rationals, among others. It is a large piece (17x22) and the colors are soft

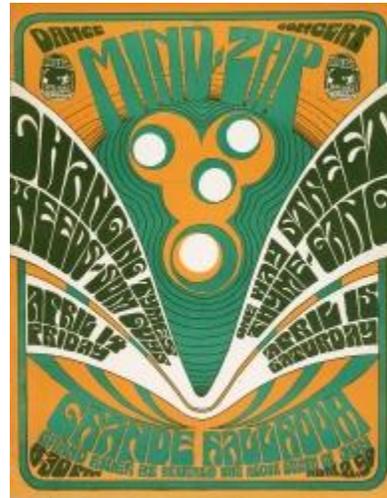
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and very rich. Gorgeous is a fair word for what this poster is. Like many of the early Grande posters, this poster has never been reprinted, but deserves to be. Grimshaw's gentle sense for color and space is already apparent.



The Lightbulb

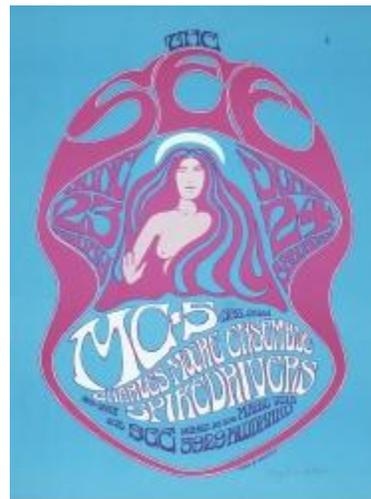
Called "Mind Zap," this is the 12th poster in the Grande Ballroom series. Grimshaw's non-frenetic sense of form and color are clearly apparent. While this is clearly of the psychedelic variety, you will notice that it is not cramped or tight feeling. Instead, a sense of space, something Grimshaw will use more as time goes on, calms the mind.



Mind Zap

Here is a quality of Grimshaw's that separates him from many of the psychedelic artists, the fact that his posters, rather than excite or incite, tend to be calming. They have a sense of space that calms, rather than excites, the mind.

A lovely handbill for the MC5 and the Spike Drivers at the See, a venue in the Detroit area. Although somewhat in the style of many West Coast posters, the cool colors and expansiveness -- the sense of space -- makes this poster very attractive.



The See

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One of Grimshaw's more popular posters for a classic group, Cream. This is available in reprint; the originals are very hard to find. The characteristic subtle Grimshaw colors are there. Note the sense of space created by the open border, surrounding the central image.



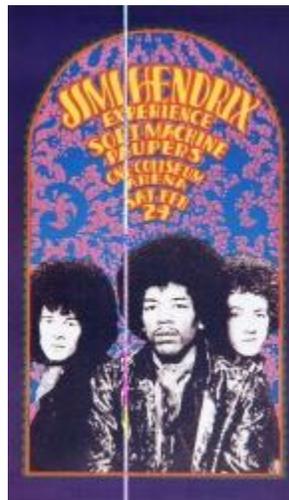
The Cream

A classic Grimshaw poster, the 30th in the Grande Ballroom series, is very hard to find and never been reprinted. Once again, as in many Grimshaw posters, there is a sense of spaciousness, mostly achieved by placing the central image in a field of red. Although perhaps not obvious from this thumbnail, this is a very effective and lovely poster. The colors are superb.



John Mayall

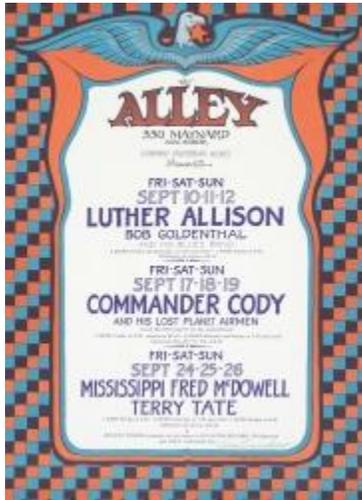
One of the most popular Grimshaw pieces with the public, this is the 31st poster in the Grande Ballroom series, a gig for the Jimi Hendrix Experience in Toronto. While originals are scarce, the reprint is readily available.



Jimi Hendrix in Toronto

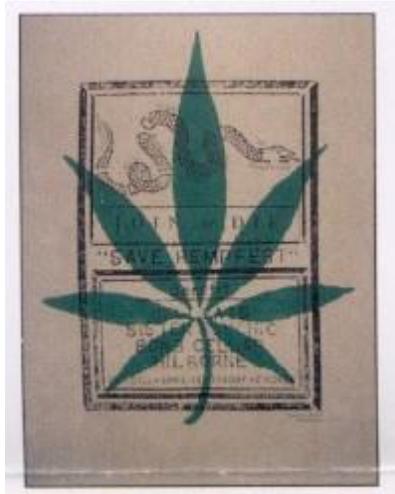
A classic poster, created by Grimshaw for the Straight Theater in San Francisco for his close friends, the MC5. Lucky for us, a reprint is available, since the originals are practically impossible to discover. Grimshaw seems to have a special style for posters dealing with the

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Poster for 'The Alley'

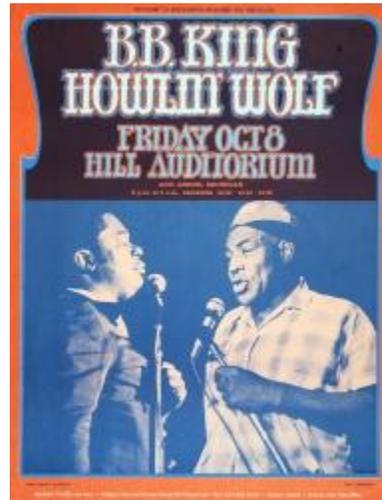
This is one of the classic posters in the UAC/Daystar series. Don't be misled by its simplicity. This large poster is an example of a style that is pretty much unique to Grimshaw. Just look at the space! Instead of filling in every square inch of poster, Grimshaw floats the lettering and the photo image. This piece just continues to grow on you.



UAC/Daystar with John Lee Hooker

Another classic UAC/Daystar piece from Grimshaw, a concert with B.B. King and Howlin' Wolf at Hill Auditorium. The colors are rich and, like many in this

series, there is the sense of spaciousness and rich colors.



B.B. King and Howlin' Wolf

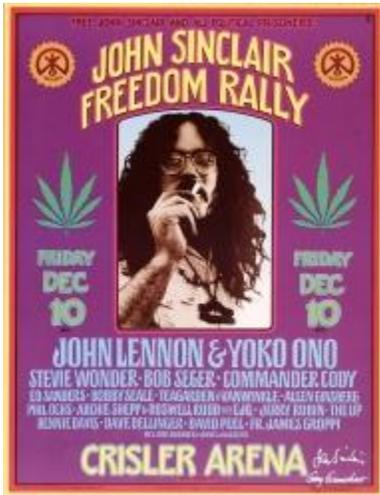
What a great poster -- Simple, elegant, cosmic! Once again, Grimshaw dares to be uncluttered.



Quicksilver at the Ohio Theater

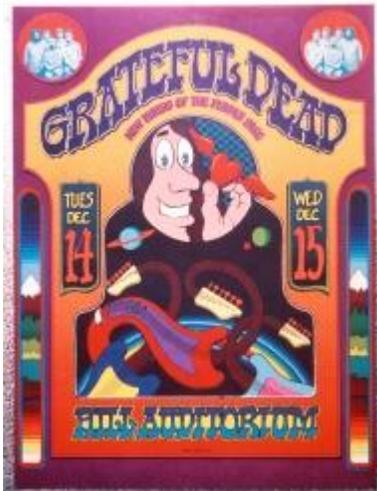
This poster is a great piece of art and also an historic document.

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John Sinclair Freedom Rally

And just to close this brief section, here is a Grimshaw poster that he did for the Grateful Dead at Hill Auditorium.



Grateful Dead at Hill Auditorium

Michael@Erlewine.net